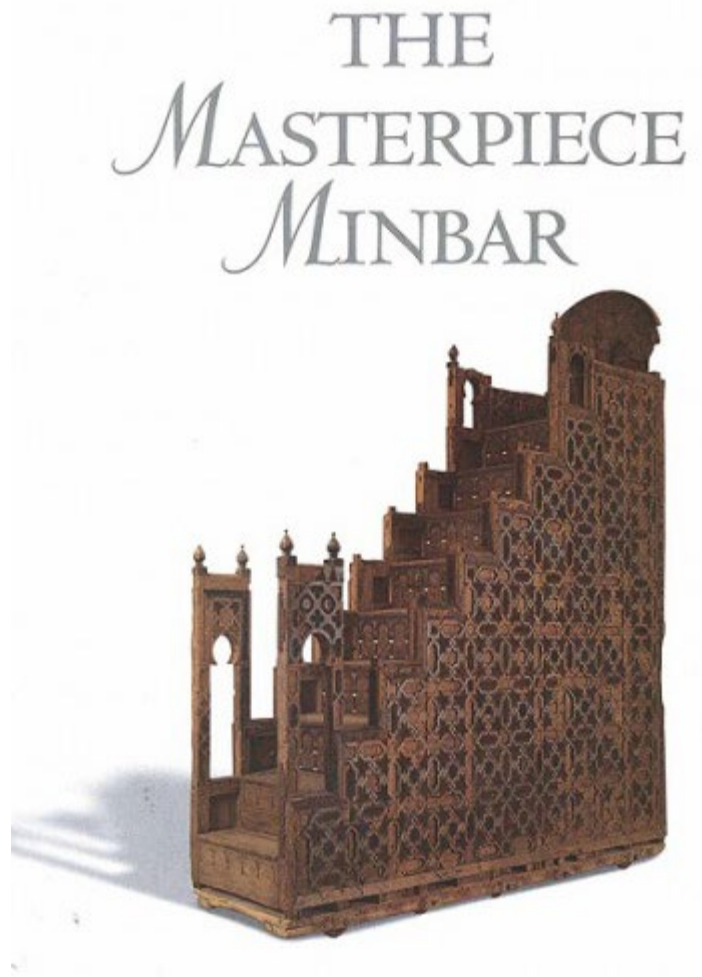


# The Masterpiece Minbar

By Jonathan M.Bloom on January 2, 2012 in Crafts, Furniture, Wood Work

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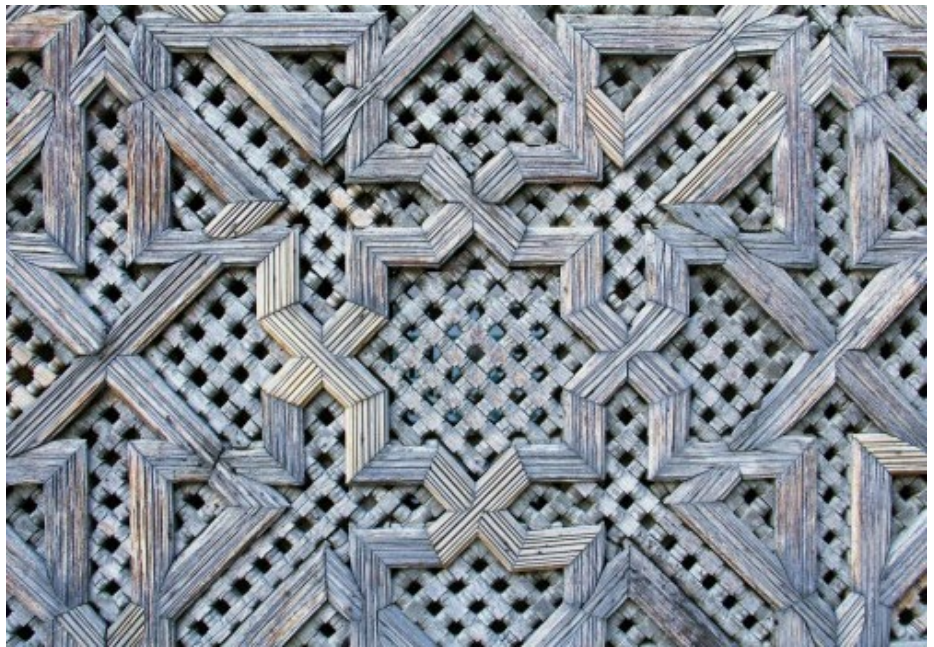


**Until relatively recent times, wooden furniture—in the sense of tables and chairs was little known in traditional Islamic societies. Throughout the warm and dry lands of North Africa, the Middle East, India and Central Asia, most people found it practical, as well as comfortable, to sit or kneel on the ground or on the floor. They used soft carpets to protect themselves from dirt; they leaned against cushions and firmly stuffed bolsters. Even rulers usually went along with this common practice and sat cross-legged on rugs and cushions that were sometimes laid out on slightly raised platforms.**



This truncated star is one of the few carvings that represents man made objects, showing a lamp hanging from a scalloped arch that probably symbolizes the mihrab. The pattern in the strapwork bands was made by gluing together lengths of square- and rectangular-section pieces of bone and wood and then sawing the bundle into end-grain tiles, as one might slice a loaf of bread.

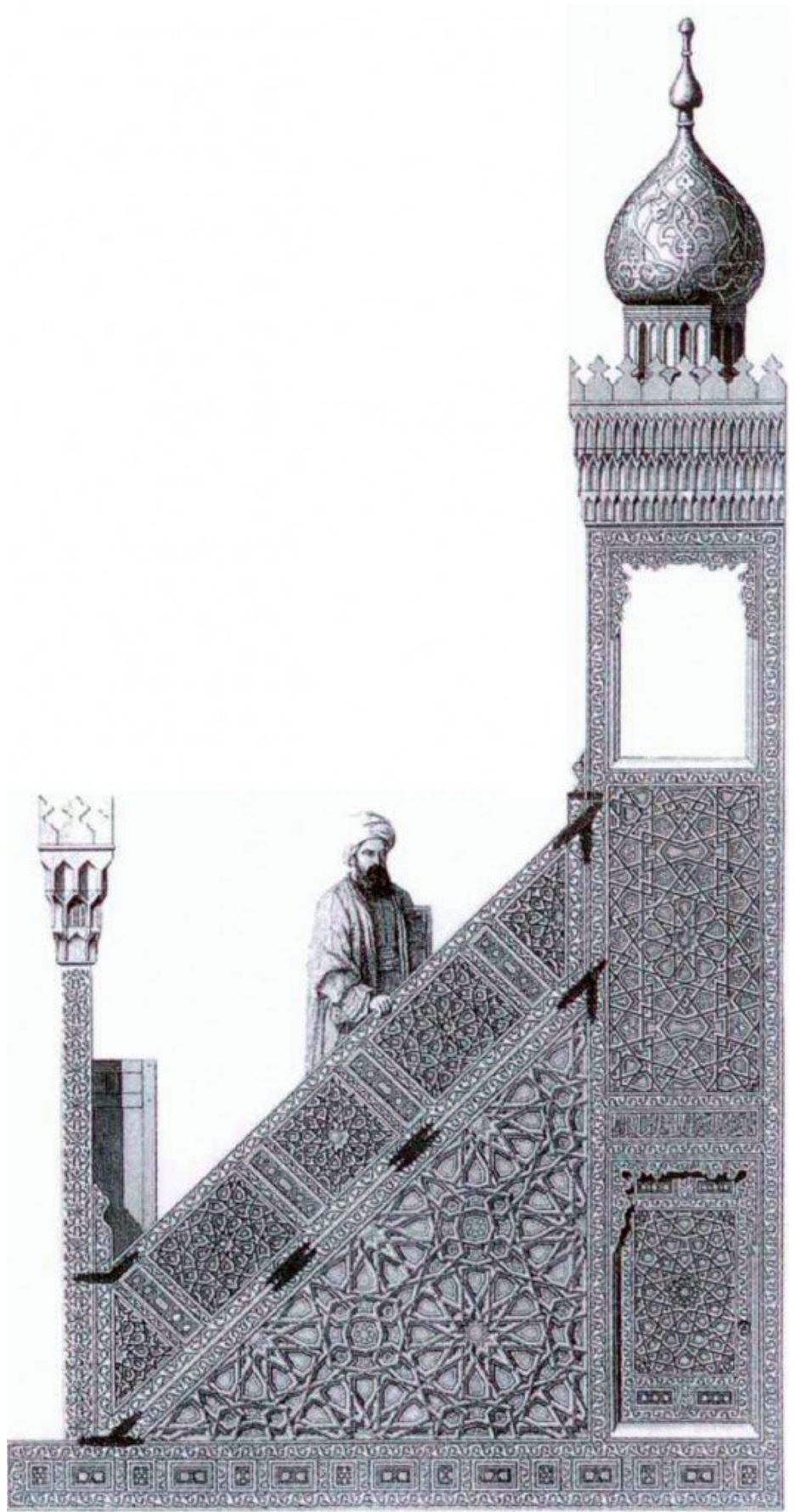
An important reason for the absence of furniture in these parts of the world was the scarcity and high cost of wood. Timber was usually reserved for essential uses, such as building boats, supporting roofs, or making doors and shutters, and many old building timbers, for example, show signs of repeated reuse. After Muslim forces reconquered Acre from the Crusaders in 1291, Pope Nicholas IV barred Christians from selling timber to Muslims in an attempt to prevent the Muslims from building ships, and this “war of wood” continued for many decades.



A mashrabiya screen overlaid with ring design

Throughout the Muslim lands, craftsmen treated wood as a precious resource, and they learned to use small pieces of it to great artistic advantage, elaborating such techniques as *mashrabiyya*, in which lathe-turned pieces of wood are joined into grille-work, often used as a screen over a window; inlay, in which little pieces of colored woods are inserted into recesses carved in a larger piece of wood; and marquetry, in which a surface is entirely covered with little pieces of wood veneer laid side-by-side to form patterns. All these techniques are commonly found in small wooden objects, such as boxes, low tabouret tables and stands, in the Islamic world.





Minbar of the Qaitbai Mosque in Cairo, 1472/73, engraving from a drawing of 1877 The pulpit (minbar) of the mosque where prayers are held on Fridays, usually wooden and made in the form of a flight of steps, originally served not only as a place for the preacher to stand but as a throne or judgement seat for Muhammad and the caliphs, who were political as well as religious leaders of the community. As the number of the faithful

increased, and mosques grew larger, higher minbars were necessary. They also became more and more elaborately and artistically ornamented. Today the minbar is exclusively used as a pulpit for the sermon (khutba) at Friday prayers.



Mihrab (niche) and minbar (pulpit) in sanctuary liwan at the Sultan Hassan Mosque and Madrasa, Cairo

Perhaps because it was so precious, Muslim craftsmen used wood to make minbars, the one article of furniture required in every congregational mosque. The minbar, a stepped pulpit normally located to the

right of the *mihrab* (the niche in the wall facing Makkah), is the place from which the imam preaches his sermon at Friday noon worship. Although some minbars in later centuries were built of stone or made of bricks covered with glazed tiles, from earliest times most were made of wood. And as the one ubiquitous type of wooden furniture in the Muslim world, minbars were the focus of woodworkers' greatest efforts, and were decorated with the finest materials and techniques available. Many countries and periods claim splendid examples, but perhaps the most beautiful to survive from the medieval period is the minbar formerly in the Kutubiyya Mosque of Marrakech, Morocco, which is now preserved in the Badi' Palace there.



Morocco, Marrakesh, Kutubiyya Mosque, Minbar from the Almoravid period, 1125-30, Wood and ivory, 11 ft. 9 in. x 10 ft. 7 in. x 2 ft. 8 in. (3.86 x 3.46 x .89 m)

The minbar—the word has come into English as *mimbar*—developed from the raised seat used by judges in pre-Islamic times, and it is the only common feature of the modern mosque that was used by the Prophet Muhammad himself, who addressed his followers from it. Other common features of mosques, such as the mihrab and minaret (the tower from which the call to prayer is issued) were introduced well after the Prophet's death in 632. His successors, the caliphs, made the Prophet's minbar a symbol of their authority, and eventually placed a minbar, modeled on the Prophet's, in the congregational mosque of every city, so that the caliph or his deputies could use it when addressing the community gathered for Friday worship.

At first the minbar was a simple wooden seat raised on three short steps, but in a few centuries, minbars began to be built as larger and more elaborate affairs. The steps became staircases, sometimes demarcated with an archway at the bottom; the archway was sometimes closed with doors. The seat at the top of the minbar was also elaborated and, particularly in Egypt, the Levant and Iran, was sometimes covered with a wooden canopy.





Hagia Sophia minbar. Image by David Jones via Flickr

Rules for the use and placement of minbars varied from place to place. Some Muslims believed that no city could have more than one minbar, located in the city's single congregational mosque, or that minbars could only be brought out when they were needed for the Friday sermon. Others felt that it was acceptable to have more than one in a particular city or to leave them in place all week. In the Maghrib (North Africa and al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain), it became common practice to store the minbar in a closet built into the wall to the right of the mihrab. Because they were quite heavy, Maghribi minbars were built on wheels so that they could be rolled out of the closet, and wooden tracks were often laid on the carpets or mats of the mosque floor to make the task easier.



Minbar at the Great Mosque of Kairoun, Tunisia

The oldest surviving minbar in North Africa is the one still in the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, which was assembled more than a thousand years ago, in the middle of the ninth century. The panels of Javanese teakwood were probably carved in Iraq and then shipped to North Africa, where they were assembled in a carved teakwood frame. Unusually, this minbar seems never to have had wheels.





Minbar (pulpit) formerly in the Kutubiyya mosque. From Cordoba, Spain, 1137, Almoravid period. Detail of the marquetry on the sides of the minbar. Cedar wood, ebony and ivory, H:3,86 m

The most famous minbar was that of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, commissioned by the 10th-century Umayyad caliph al-Hakam II on the occasion of his expansion of the mosque. According to the 12th-century geographer al-Idrisi, six craftsmen and their apprentices worked



Minbar (pulpit) formerly in the Kutubiyya mosque. From Cordoba, Spain, 1137, Almoravid period. Detail of the intarsia



for seven years to  
finish it. The

work on the steps. Cedar wood, ebony and ivory, H:3,86 cm

Moroccan historian Ibn ‘Idhari, a native of Marrakech who lived in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, wrote that the Córdoba minbar was inlaid with red and yellow sandalwood, ebony, ivory and Indian wood, and that it cost the enormous sum of 35,705 gold dinars—at a time when a family of modest means required 20 to 30 dinars a year to live on! Although it was destroyed by Christian zealots in the 16th century, archeologists working in the mosque, which is now the Cathedral of Córdoba, discovered the remains of a closet to the right of the former mihrab where the minbar had presumably been stored.

The Kutubiyya minbar was probably built in the same workshop that made the famous Córdoba one, for a newly deciphered inscription on its left side states that it was ordered in Córdoba on the first day of Muharram 532 AH (September 19, 1137) for the congregational mosque in Marrakech. Thus it was most probably ordered by the ruling Almoravid sultan, ‘Ali ibn Yusuf, son and successor of the Berber amir Yusuf ibn Tashufin, whose long, 36-year reign is generally regarded as one of the most brilliant in the history of the Muslim West. Although Marrakech remained the capital of the Almoravid kingdom, which included most of present-day Morocco and southern Spain, Córdoba returned in those years to the central intellectual, artistic and social position it had held more than a century earlier under the Umayyads, when the city had been a center of literature and the arts.



Kutubiyya Minbar

The Kutubiyya minbar, which stands nearly 4 meters high, 3½ meters deep and nearly 1 meter wide (13 by 11 by 3 ft), was prefabricated in pieces, so that it could be transported from Spain to Morocco. It must have been assembled and installed in the mosque of Marrakech by 1147, since it was in that year that the Almoravids lost the city to their Almohad rivals. The Almohads, also a Berber reformist group, had taken advantage of the Almoravids' preoccupation with Iberian affairs to extend their power from the High Atlas mountains south of Marrakech.

After taking the city, the Almohad ruler destroyed the Almoravid mosque on the pretext of correcting its faulty orientation, which was said not to point exactly towards Makkah; however, he transferred its beautiful minbar as a trophy to the new mosque he built on the ruins of the Almoravid palace he had also destroyed. Apart from the minbar, all that remained of the earlier mosque was the charming ablution pavilion that once stood in its court.

An anonymous medieval author reports that a skilled engineer from Malaga



designed a magnificent screened wooden enclosure, or *maqsurah*, for this new Almohad mosque. The *maqsurah*, he wrote, was housed in slots in the floor of the mosque; when the sultan entered the mosque, a counterbalance mechanism, presumably activated by his weight, raised the screen from where it rested to define a private enclosure for the ruler and his courtiers. When the sultan left, the *maqsurah* sank back into the floor, where it remained for the rest of the week. In fact, archeologists working at the site of this mosque in the late 1940's confirmed the basic elements of this story by finding the trenches that would have held the *maqsurah*. They also found the remains of another wondrous mechanism, described in the same text, that automatically opened the door of the closet that housed the minbar when the preacher stood up to give the Friday sermon, and silently rolled the minbar out. The Muslims of Spain delighted in elaborate mechanical devices and automata such as those.

At some time before 1162, the Almohad mosque was also found to be incorrectly oriented toward Makkah, so yet another mosque was built at a slightly different angle, adjacent to the first one. The magnificent minbar was transferred yet again to the new mosque, and it was this that came to be known as the Kutubiyya ("Booksellers") Mosque, because of the dozens of bookshops that once surrounded it.

When the minbar first came to scholarly attention in the 1920's, French scholars thought it had been made for the Kutubiyya Mosque itself. Over the years, the minbar was repeatedly cited as one of the great examples of medieval Islamic art, but it was rarely seen by non-Muslims. It remained in the mosque until the 1960's, when it was transferred to a local museum. Then, in preparation for an international exhibition of the arts of Islamic Spain held in 1992 at the Alhambra in Granada and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (See *Aramco World*, September/October 1992), the minbar was photographed extensively, but was ultimately deemed too fragile to travel.

In 1996 a US-Moroccan team agreed to undertake scientific conservation—though not restoration—of the minbar's structure and decoration so that its beauties could be made accessible to a wider audience. Under the aegis of Abdelaziz Touri, director of cultural patrimony for Morocco, a series of drawings was produced that recorded and analyzed the minbar's every detail. At the same time, the team prepared designs for restoring a suitable space in the largely ruined Badi' Palace, where the minbar would become the centerpiece of a new museum of Islamic art.

Conservators from the United States spent seven months in Marrakech studying the minbar, strengthening its structure, regluing fallen panels and removing several centuries of grime from its decoration. Stefano Carboni, assistant curator of Islamic art at the Metropolitan Museum, researched the minbar's history along with the author of this article. The minbar is now on public display in a new gallery at the refurbished Badi' Palace, which opened last May.

Originally, every visible surface of the Kutubiyya minbar was covered in a web of decoration comprised of either carved panels or marquetry. Some of the carved panels measure several centimeters across, but many of the pieces of which the marquetry is composed are smaller than a grain of rice. El Mostafa Hbib, inspector of historic monuments for Marrakech, estimates that the

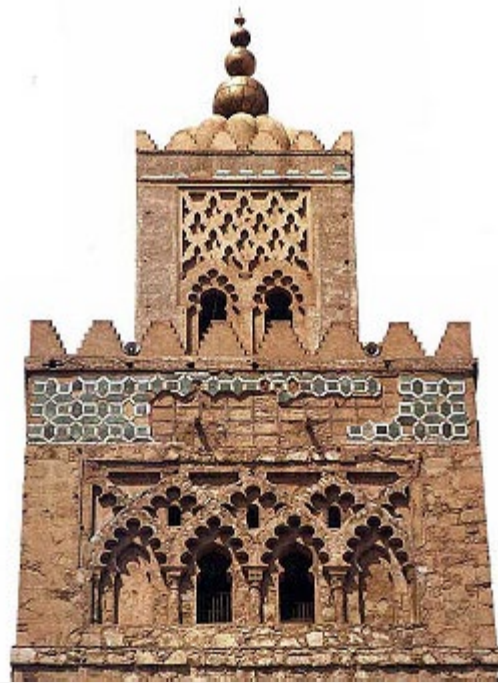
minbar was originally composed of more than 1.3 million pieces of wood. If the Córdoba minbar took seven years to complete, as the texts tell us, a team of craftsmen and apprentices must have worked for no less time to build and decorate the Kutubiyya one.

The conservators determined that, in addition to the standard range of saws, drills, chisels and gouges that medieval craftsmen used, the builders of the Kutubiyya minbar must also have used a fretsaw—a thin, flexible toothed blade held under tension in a deeply bow-shaped or U-shaped frame. Until then, scholars had believed that this tool had been invented in 16th-century Italy, but it was clear that the fine, undulating decoration on the risers of the minbar's steps could only have been cut with such a tool, four centuries earlier than it was previously thought to exist.

On the other hand, the conservators were unable to explain exactly how medieval artisans had created other aspects of the decoration, such as the tiny, one-centimeter square tiles, inlaid with still smaller cubes of wood, that make up the background of many panels.

Each of the triangular sides of the Kutubiyya minbar is decorated with a geometric pattern of intersecting bands, called strap work, which outline a design of irregular polygons of four different shapes: two sizes of eight-pointed star, both known as *khatam*, or “seal [of Solomon]”; an elongated hexagon with triangular projections on the long sides, known as *asmitraqa*, or “hammer”; and an irregular Y-shaped, six-pointed star, known as *difda'a*—and colloquially in Morocco as *jarana*, or “frog.” While the bands are worked in marquetry of colored wood and bone, each of these four types of polygon is made of a particular precious wood: The stars are carved of African blackwood (*Dalbergia spp.*, an exceptionally hard and fine-grained wood), the hexagons of boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) and the “frogs” of jujube (*Zizyphus spp.*). The recent cleaning has revealed the distinct colors of these different woods, which the centuries had darkened into an undifferentiated brown. The vibrant colors of the patterns reveal the close relationship between them and the traditional art of tile mosaic, known in Morocco as *zillij*, which in Maghribi architecture is used to decorate walls. Indeed, a band of mid-12th-century *zillij* girdles the top of the minaret of the Kutubiyya Mosque itself, one of the earliest surviving examples of the technique. Like the minbar's, its pattern too is based on overlapping octagons.





A band of green-and-white zillij, the geometrical tile work whose patterns are akin to those of the minbar, girdles the square minaret of the Kutubiyya Mosque in Marrakech.

*Zillij*, intricately patterned and subtly colored, relies for its effect on the repetition of designs and motifs. In contrast, the decoration of the Kutubiyya minbar is never quite repetitive. Among the carved panels, no two are exactly alike, and each waits for the viewer's eye to explore it as a miniature but complete work of art in itself. Some panels are decorated with shallow symmetrical designs of leaves and stems known as vegetal arabesques, while others show more deeply carved naturalistic foliage, frozen in time as if a breath of wind had just rippled across it. A few panels display manmade objects, such as two columns supporting a scalloped arch and a hanging lamp, which presumably represents a mihrab. The carving on the blackwood panels is so fine, and the wood so finegrained, that they were once thought to have been carved from colored ivory; all are clearly the work of immensely experienced and talented craftsmen.

The two sizes of stars defined by the strapwork design on the flanks of the minbar generate a subtle modulation of the overall pattern that prevents it from becoming monotonous. While all the vertical and horizontal bands are exactly in line, the diagonals slightly expand and contract, thereby energizing the whole. The overall design is precisely coordinated to match the minbar's stepped profile: Each repetition of the pattern corresponds to one of the steps. Each side panel is bordered by stepped bands containing a long Arabic inscription. The individual letters, also carved from blackwood and outlined with thin strips of white bone, are set against a background of tiny wooden tiles, each one inlaid with minuscule blocks of wood that form yet another pattern.

This inscription was long recognized to contain quotations from the Qur'an, and the recent cleaning revealed them to be passages from Surah 2 ("The Cow") and Surah 7 ("The Heights") that refer to the throne of God, an appropriate

metaphor for a minbar. The passage from Surah 2 even includes the sentence, “He brings them forth from the shadows into the light,” a selection that could be a reference to the minbar’s removal from its closet each week. It was a great surprise, however, when the cleaning also revealed that the inscription on the left side ended with a historical text and date, which turned out to be 15 years later than scholars had previously believed.



Each of the minbar's nine stair risers is a panel of Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*) veneered with marquetry. Each shows two different vegetal patterns alternating on a reticulated mosaic background, each pair contained within the common motif of five linked horseshoe arches. Sculptured decorations in high relief fill the spandrels of the arches, and the columns supporting the arches have vegetal secondary capitals carved of bone. Conservators believe the curved marquetry patterns could only have been carved with a narrow-bladed, fine-toothed fretsaw, four centuries before this tool had previously been believed to have existed.

Each riser of the staircase is decorated with an arcade of linked horseshoe arches enclosing vegetal motifs worked in marquetry, and arched frames on either side of the stairway display beautiful geometric and arabesque decoration on the exterior and exquisite carved inscriptions, also texts from the Qur'an, on the interior.

Perhaps the finest decoration was reserved for the minbar’s backrest, which originally had a complex design worked in delicate marquetry and pierced carving. It represented intersecting cusped arches reminiscent of those in the maqsura around the mihrab in Córdoba’s congregational mosque. Although preachers traditionally leave the seat at the top of the minbar vacant, in deference to the Prophet Muhammad, this area of the Kutubiyya minbar has paradoxically suffered the most loss of its decoration, and its glories can only be imagined on the basis of the scant remains and by comparison with similar works.





Of any of the minbar's panels, the backrest, which has suffered the greatest loss of decoration, was probably also the most finely worked. Its remaining calligraphic decoration, sophisticated and fluent, allowed historians to determine when and by whom the minbar had been commissioned; the name Ibn Tashuftn appears on the impost block on the far left of the backrest, midway down. The backrest once had pierced carving above the twin cusped arches. Conservators have found traces of the gold leaf they believe underlay this openwork and allowed reflected light to gleam from the depths of the carving.

Conservators discovered traces of gold leaf on certain areas of the backrest and hypothesized that these areas would have been covered with panels whose backgrounds had been pierced, or carved entirely away, very much like those on the slightly later Almohad minbar in the Kasba Mosque of Marrakech. The effect would have been extraordinary, as the reflected light glittered in the dark depths of the carving. An elegantly simple inscription encircles the top of the backrest; although the date has been lost, the text commemorates the completion of the work, probably sometime in the early 1140's. A text carved on the impost blocks supporting the arches invokes God's blessing on the ruler, much as the imam would have invoked them in the sermons he gave from the minbar.

Unlike many great examples of medieval Islamic art, which—as far as we know—passed unnoticed by contemporary witnesses, the Kutubiyya minbar was already considered to be a great work of art in medieval times. Ibn Marzuq, the 14th-century North African preacher, statesman and *hadith* scholar, or traditionist, wrote that “...all craftsmen... agree that the minbar of the Mosque

of Córdoba and the minbar of the Kutubiyya Mosque in Marrakech are the most remarkable in craftsmanship, because it is not customary for Easterners to have fine woodwork in their buildings.”

Ibn Marzuq must surely have known more about the arts of the “East” than that statement implies, for during his extensive travels he had preached from minbars in many of the most important mosques in Syria and Egypt. He must have known that their woodwork was finely crafted, although different in style and technique from what he knew at home in the Maghrib.



Mosque of Hebron Minbar

For example, Ibn Marzuq is known to have preached at the mosque of Hebron, and the minbar there is one of the finest examples of its type to survive, having been ordered for the mausoleum of Husayn at Ashkelon in 1091 or 1092, only a few decades earlier than the Kutubiyya minbar. In contrast to the design of the Kutubiyya minbar, woodworkers in the central Islamic lands from Egypt to Iran favored an approach in which the sides and other flat surfaces were, decorated with large-scale strapwork patterns that often radiated from central stars. These radiating bands create polygons of varied shapes, and the aesthetic purpose is to amaze the viewer, who will wonder how the designer has made seemingly disparate and irreconcilable elements combine into a rational and logical pattern.

This “Eastern” kind of woodwork also differed in technique from that of the Maghrib. In contrast to the decoration glued on the wooden carcass of the Kutubiyya minbar, the decoration on the Hebron minbar was actually constructed from grooved pieces of wood fitted together with mortise-and-tenon joints. Each of the strapwork elements is carved with parallel grooves, while each of the polygonal pieces is carved with interlaced arabesque designs. The balustrade is made up of mashrabiyya spoolwork, one of the earliest surviving examples of this technique. Furthermore, in contrast to the intricate and small-scale patterns common in the West, those used on minbars from the

central Islamic lands, particularly in Hebron and Jerusalem, are much larger in scale, so that only a fraction of the design, or at most a few repeats, is visible at any one time. These differences of technique, design, and taste begin to explain why Ibn Marzuq could write that “it was not customary for Easterners to have fine woodwork in their buildings.”

The extraordinary state of preservation of the Kutubiyya minbar and its recent conservation provide us with one of the finest and most complete examples of medieval Islamic art from the Muslim West. While the Almoravids were considered rough and austere reformists when they first arrived in al-Andalus, they developed a high culture and refinement, and there can be no question that ‘Ali ibn Yusuf was an enlightened patron of the arts. The subtle contrasts between the techniques of carving and marquetry, the textures of smooth and patterned surfaces, the subjects of geometric and vegetal ornament, and the colors of monochrome wood and vibrantly colored marquetry are the basic organizing principles of the minbar’s design. Viewed from a distance, the colorful tile-like patterns seem to take precedence, but from close up the viewer is beckoned to explore the intricacies of individual elements.

At the same time, as in much Islamic art, there is considerable ambiguity as to what part of the design is meant to be “the subject” and what is meant to be “the background.” For example, are the carved panels meant to be seen as the background between the strapwork bands, or are the panels the subjects, and the bands merely separators? Within a fairly narrow repertory of forms and techniques, which in the hands of lesser masters might have approached monotony, all of these elements are played off against one another in a series of subtle variations, much as classical Andalusian and North African art music consisted of similar variations within canons of rhythm and melody.

*A member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s binational team that carried out the conservation of the Kutubiyya minbar, art historian **Jonathan M. Bloom** is the lead author of The Minbar From the Kutubiyya Mosque (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, ISBN 0-87099-854-4), and author of numerous other books and articles. He lives in New Hampshire.*

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